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Web site allows students to turn clicks into cliques

BYLINE: ANDREA JONES

BODY:

Way before Georgia State University freshman Rebecca Hickom ever set her sneakers on campus for the first time, the Cartersville teenager had already chatted with her roommates, checked out her dorm-hall neighbors and met another freshman who shares her love of indie-rock music --- a guy, "just a friend," she's been hanging out with "like every single night."

Parental withdrawal? Not for this 18-year-old.

"I had a lot of things to look forward to," Hickom said last week, hitching up her backpack outside the GSU dorms as she headed to her first class of the semester.

For college freshmen, the days of lonely dining-hall lunches or awkward, foot-shuffling introductions have gone the way of the dot-matrix printer. This year, many of these tech-savvy teens are coming to school pre-acquainted, thanks to www.facebook.com, a voyeuristic virtual network that posts pictures, profiles and e-mail addresses of millions of college students.

Created in February 2004 by then-Harvard sophomore Mark Zuckerberg as a way for students on the Boston campus to connect, facebook has since exploded onto more than 800 colleges and universities nationwide. The free service allows any student with a ".edu" e-mail address to post his or her identity online, offering them options on everything from political leanings to favorite movies and books.

Facing competition

Facebook isn't the only social networking directory out there. Myspace.com and friendster.com also link people with pictures and profiles for free. Millions of people have joined those services, and myspace --- with its chatty blogs and heavy focus on music --- also competes for younger members. But facebook has special appeal for college students because it limits the pool to their peers.

About 60 percent of facebook users log in every day, said Chris Hughes, Zuckerberg's former roommate and facebook's spokesman. The site gets about 100 million hits per day.

Through the network, students can ferret out new friends, find out who their ex is dating and even re-connect with high school buddies at other schools.

See a cute guy in your English 101 class? A few quick clicks on facebook and you can find out whether he's single, sweet or a social pariah.

Hughes said the site has grown from 150,000 student users last August to more than 3 million this fall. More than 450,000 of them are freshmen.

"This is really the first fall that everybody's on it," said Hughes, who along with Zuckerberg and another Harvard student took time off from school to run the site from Palo Alto, Calif. "I think there's some social pressure."

Facebook.com is now one of the top 20 Web sites in the country, with traffic nearly 80 times that of all college newspapers combined, Hughes said. Hughes doesn't talk about the financial aspect of the company, other than to say facebook is "making a profit." The site draws income from advertisers including Apple Computers and Victoria's Secret and has deals pending with other large companies.

Trevor Stittleburg, a Georgia Tech freshman from Kennesaw, said he registered on the site this summer before he got to campus.

As Stittleburg waited for an interview in front of the Theta Chi fraternity house recently, he spotted one of his new facebook friends across the street and waved.

Erika Gemzer, 18, clad in green capri pants for her first day of sorority rush, flitted across Techwood Drive to say hello.

The two met at a freshmen orientation party a few evenings before and had already exchanged e-mails through the Web site.

"It's great because you can see what interests people have and what you have in common," Stittleburg said, as Gemzer nodded. "It's a really excellent tool."

"Everybody's facebooking each other," Gemzer said. "It's a verb."

Facebook automatically links together students by university, allowing all students at the same school to see each other's profiles and friends' lists. Students can ask classmates and students at other universities to be their "friends," an invitation to join their online social network.

The receiver can either accept or reject the sender's offer --- a decidedly middle school-esque feature that has proved popular among the college set.

The service is not affiliated with any university or college and faculty and alumni with ".edu" addresses also can join.

Georgia Tech sophomore David Hotle, a computer engineering major, admits to being "obsessed with facebook."

"I'm on it five, six times a day," said Hotle, who has more than 360 "friends" in his network and describes himself as "very conservative" in his profile. "It's an easy way to find people."

Foreign faces

In addition to checking in with local classmates, facebook also has proved popular for students studying abroad.

Emory senior Bennett Hilley said she kept up with friends while studying in Spain last semester and even found one of her best childhood friends online.

"I hadn't talked to her in years and years," Hilley said. "It was very cool to catch up."

College newspapers also have gotten into the facebook game --- with reporters sometimes using student profiles to track down friends of lawbreakers or find members of certain groups.

Tech senior Lauren Ray said she initially dismissed facebook as "stupid" and "sort of stalkerish," when she first heard about the site last year. But she said her friends convinced her to put up a profile.

Now, Ray, 21, said she routinely logs on to facebook and has updated her picture several times since joining.

"Everybody looks at it, whether they admit it or not," Ray said. "Some people are really addicted."

Ray was even recently asked out on a date by a fellow who had "facebooked" her after meeting her at a bar. She jokingly laments that facebook "is ruining" the college dating scene.

"It doesn't take any courage to ask somebody out through facebook," she said. "I haven't decided whether to respond yet."

GRAPHIC: KEITH HADLEY / Staff Georgia Tech freshman James Yoo clicks on facebook. The site automatically links together students by university. Users ask others to be their "friends" -- an invitation to join their network. ; KEITH HADLEY / Staff Georgia Tech freshman Catherine Hotsko says she is not a facebook user but is thinking about

joining the online community. SOCIAL NETWORK University.....Facebook users.....Freshmen Facebook users
UGA..... 25,414.....3,883 Emory.....7,912.....1,301 Georgia
State.....8,544.....1,067 Georgia Tech.....11,410.....1,657

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